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SUBJECT: USCIRF MEETS HCMC GVN: CITY COUNCIL CHAIR MADAME THAO

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Summary

¶1. (SBU) During the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (CIRF) delegation's meeting with HCMC People's Council Chairwoman Pham Phuong Thao on October 25, Commissioners cited outstanding issues that marred the GVN's record of progress on religious freedom, including limitations with the GVN's legal framework on religion, harassment and surveillance of religious groups and the failure of the GVN to return church properties. Chairwoman Thao pointed out the positive, citing examples of GVN initiatives that support Vietnam's largest population of religious followers. She also said that HCMC's government was striving to balance rapid economic growth with its citizen's social welfare and quality of life needs--including the freedom to practice their faith. Thao also welcomed a broader dialogue with religious groups, encouraged them to report specific problems via the Council's public hotline, and invited CIRF to send a list of groups with specific concerns directly to her office. End summary.

The USCIRF Position

¶2. (SBU) While the USCIRF delegation acknowledged positive developments since the GVN adopted a policy of religious freedom, they also told Madame Thao, that restrictions on religious groups--some of which they attribute to the legal framework on religion-- overshadow the progress made thus far. The Commissioners said that religious freedom must be expanded by returning confiscated church property, removing restrictions on religious groups' involvement in vocational, educational, medical, and other charitable activities and addressing harassment of religious leaders and practitioners.

HCMC's Leadership Role

¶3. (U) Chairwoman Thao said HCMC's government took a very dynamic and creative approach to fostering economic development, which has made the city a leader in terms of Vietnam's integration into the global economy and international community.

As the largest city in the country with highest growth rate (averaging ten-plus percent over the past decade with an expected rate of 12% for this year), Thao acknowledged the challenge of maintaining social stability and improving living conditions for HCMC's residents while promoting further growth. Thao said expanding the city's infrastructure, restructuring the economy around technology rather than more labor intensive industries, and streamlining government procedures through public administration reform were all major challenges the HCMC government grapples with daily.

¶4. (U) Thao affirmed that effective implementation of the legal framework on religion is an important part of HCMC's ongoing development, as Ho Chi Minh City has the largest number of religious followers in Vietnam, with roughly one-third of the city's 8.5 million residents practicing a religion. The Chairwoman described a thriving religious community consisting of approximately 2,000 congregations and 1,500 places of worship. She added that permission was granted for 68 new religious sites to be constructed in the past year alone. Madame Thao said HCMC authorities do everything in their power to guarantee and safeguard the freedom of religion and gave examples of government support for religious festivals during Christmastime and the various Buddhist festivals held throughout the year. Thao also said the GVN provides support for opening religious training institutes, gives incentives and "favorable treatment" to religious institutions looking for land (citing the example of a 20 hectare plot recently set aside for the building of a Buddhist temple), and facilitates the upgrade of existing places of worship. Thao also noted the importance of the more than 200 faith-based educational and training institutions playing an active role in charitable activities.

Chairwoman Thao's Vow

¶5. (SBU) Commissioner Gaer raised concerns that the legal framework on religion was being used by the Vietnamese government to control religious groups, citing instances where GVN authorities have delayed or denied registration of new religious groups as well as reports of surveillance by local officials after churches provided the names of their followers. (Note: While providing names of followers is not required by law, several house church leaders have said GVN authorities request lists of practitioners as part of the registration process. End note.) Gaer asked whether the GVN had given any consideration to establishing a hotline for religious groups to report problems with the authorities.

¶6. (SBU) Chairwoman Thao said the Vietnamese government is doing its utmost to implement the ordinance but acknowledged some

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shortcomings in execution will always occur, as matters often unfold much differently in reality than in theory. Thao said the GVN has organized training seminars for civil servants to teach them about the religious ordinance in order to facilitate its implementation. Thao said HCMC is limited in its ability to directly influence what goes on in other provinces and can only seek to persuade officials by sharing its own positive experiences. That said, Thao believes the dialogue between the government and the public on numerous issues--including religion--has grown over the past few years. In HCMC, citizens can communicate with city officials via telephone hotline, email, or post, as well as at town hall meetings held several times a year.

¶7. (SBU) Thao said while there was no separate religious issues hotline, groups could report issues via the public hotline and reports of religious abuses would be given priority. Thao offered to sit down and discuss specific concerns with any religious groups facing problems and invited the USCIRF to send a list of groups reporting problems to her office so that she could look into their cases directly (Note: Consul General Fairfax gave Madame Thao USCIRF's letter and list on November 130. End note). Thao also expressed surprise over Commissioner Gaer's comment regarding GVN surveillance and said that organizations and individuals should not be surveilled if they are undertaking "normal religious activities." She also said that no one in HCMC should be asking for lists of the members of churches.

The UBCV Question

¶8. (SBU) Commissioner Bansal asked Councilwoman Thao whether government would consider opening a dialogue with other Buddhist groups like the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) and allow them to organize independently and operate legally in Ho

Chi Minh City. Chairwoman Thao said the UBCV was one of nine Buddhist denominations integrated into the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha in 1981 and therefore no longer an independent legal entity in Vietnam. Thao said UBCV members are free to practice their religion and participate in charitable activities, but not under the banner of the UBCV. Chairwoman Thao gave examples of two other officially recognized religions with Buddhist underpinnings--the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai. Thao said HCMC's 500 Hoa Hao leaders and followers have their own temple and the city is currently considering a request from Hoa Hao headquarters in An Giang province to open a representative office in Ho Chi Minh City. Thao said the Cao Dai currently have eleven different congregations located around the city, and ordained the largest number of church leaders ever over the past year. In addition, city authorities provided assistance for training clergy and registered two new Cao Dai denominations this year.

Church Property: Borrowed vs. Given

¶9. (SBU) Addressing CIRF's questions about church property taken by the government shortly after 1975, Chairwoman Thao made a distinction between "borrowed" properties and "given" properties. Thao said properties that had been formally "given" to the government will not be returned, but assured the Commission the land was being used for purposes consistent with the intentions of the religious organizations who gave the government the land. Thao said former church property that had been "borrowed" by the government is now being returned.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: While towing the GVN company line on issues like the UBCV and GVN church property, Thao was frank in acknowledging uneven implementation of the legal framework throughout Vietnam and open to reviewing specific instances of unfair treatment experienced by churches in Ho Chi Minh City. CIRF noted Thao's responsiveness and offer to review specific cases of religious freedom violations and expressed their intention to follow-up on this offer. Post will work with the CIRF and church leaders to assist in compiling a list of cases of for a follow up letter to Chairwoman Thao. End comment.

¶11. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
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